Images without words—the focus group as a method of examining the reading experience of comics

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This article presents a pilot study conducted in Hungary and Italy in the autumn of 2015. The study had two goals: to test the method of focus-group discussion for collecting data on a multimodal reading experience and to collect information on participants' reading experience with comics, with an emphasis on their ability to understand the visual language of comics. The study examined the importance of the verbal mode in understanding non-verbal messages and the way in which the role cultural background and the competence to read comics affect participants' interpretations of the meanings of the visual content of comics. In addition to answering the main research questions, the article reflects on focus groups as a data-collection method. The study indicated that cultural background, including the tradition of reading comics, may have an effect on enhancing participants' understanding of the visual content of comics, which is also an important aspect the translator has to take into consideration.

1. Introduction

Translation Studies is an academic area that is interdisciplinary by its very nature. It has the potential to forge relationships with an array of disciplines such as Linguistics, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies and Sociology, to name but a few, and continues to expand into new areas. This openness towards other disciplines is bringing new research and data-gathering methods to the field of Translation Studies. For instance, researchers examining the translation process have used methods that have been developed for gathering information about processes (e.g., the think-aloud-protocol and eye-tracking). Both the audiences and the reception have been widely studied in several disciplines, such as the field of Media Studies, offering methods that are used in reception research.

Whereas reception research methods have been applied in the field of Audiovisual Translation (Chiaro, 2007; Di Giovanni, 2016; Tuominen, 2012), until recently reception in other genres has remained almost unexplored in Translation Studies. Tuominen (2012, p. 45) points out that, instead of concentrating on empirical studies of reception, reader-oriented translation research has focused on abstract images of readers or imagined addressees. Tuominen (2012) used a focus group in her research as a method of gathering information about the experiences of authentic audiences while they watched a subtitled film.

The aim of this article is to introduce a study in which focus-group discussion was used as a data-collecting method to examine how Italian and Hungarian readers understand the visual language of comics, especially the non-verbal messages that are conveyed via images. A focus-group discussion is not a common method used in Translation Studies. However, it is a practical method for a reader-oriented study of

multimodal texts, because it allows the researcher to examine the attitudes and perceptions of the readers. Both research into reader response and that into reception are commonly used in literary and cultural studies. In literary reception research the focus has been mainly on criticism, in other words, on the way the reading audience has received the literary production(s) of a particular writer. However, the reading experience of "real readers" has also recently received some attention in Translation Studies, and this has opened up opportunities for new methodologies (Chan, 2016, p. 146). One of these opportunities is the focus-group study, which can be exploited when examining the reading responses of a group of readers. The method yields data that cannot be presented in the form of numbers but which can answer questions that the researcher was not able to pose (Tuominen, 2012, p. 100).

The study introduced in this article examined how the readers interpreted two distinct aspects of the visual mode: first, the visual representation of sound and speed, and, second, the non-verbal communication of the comic-book characters, including their gestures, postures and facial expressions. The aim of the study was to find out whether the experience of the landscape, situations and feelings is conveyed through images alone. The study sets out to examine the following research questions:

- What happens when the reader does not understand the verbal mode of the comic book: do the non-verbal messages come across in the image?
- Do the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the readers affect the reading experience?
- What happens if the readers are not familiar with the visual language of comics?

The second research question refers to the phenomenon that is presumed also to be relevant in this study: as Jokinen (2011) points out, "most of those who have read comics since their childhood have a precoding system for the grammar of comics, which is activated in a reading situation" (p. 102; my translation). In other words, according to Jokinen, a child who is used to reading comics unconsciously learns their visual conventions. In this article, Jokinen's argument is examined by comparing two reader groups from different countries.

The data for this study were collected through focus-group discussions in Hungary and Italy in the autumn of 2015. Comics have not been a part of the Hungarian literary tradition, whereas in Italy, for example, comics are a traditional part of the culture of written communications (Csendes-Erdei, 2015). As further discussed in section 4, the Hungarian group members were not used to reading comics, whereas the Italian group members had read comics since early age. Comparing the data collected from the two focus-group discussions is expected to clarify the question of whether the precoding of the so-called "grammar of comics" (Jokinen 2011, p. 102) affects the reading experience of the comics (or, in this case, a graphic novel); and, if it does, how is this influence evinced?

The focus groups were given eight pages of a Finnish graphic novel, *Sarasvatin hiekkaa* (2008), by Petri Tolppanen and Jussi Kaakinen, to view; it is based on Risto Isomäki's eco-thriller of the same title (*Sarasvatin hiekkaa,* 2005; published in English as *The Sands of Sarasvati)*. The members of the groups did not understand Finnish, the language in which the graphic novel was written, and for this reason they had to interpret the meanings of the excerpts without the support of a verbal mode.

Comics are multimodal: they combine images and words, non-verbal and verbal, in one entity. This is why the visual means used in comics is introduced here before describing the course of the research. In comics, the image also includes references to other semiotic (or sign) systems such as gestures, body language and facial expressions. Recognizing the cultural differences between these semiotic systems is extremely important, not only to the visual artist but also to the reader and, more especially, the translator. Both images and the written text and other visual signs are merged in comics

and therefore the translator needs to be able to interpret other semiotic systems apart from the verbal. The translator has to know the visual conventions of comics and has to be able to analyse and interpret the culture-bound elements of visual contents; they should also be familiar with the means used to illustrate these elements in the target language and the cultural environment. Zanettin (2010, p. 39) points out that if the reader does not recognize the cultural references expressed in an image, they will not understand the humour of a humorous comic book; this could mean that the translation will not fulfil its purpose, even if the words are translated properly. The same applies to the translation of non-humorous comics: if the readers do not recognize the cultural references in the images, they may not understand the multimodal message as a whole.

2. Visual language of comics

According to McCloud (1994, p. 9), comics are "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". This argument emphasizes the visual aspect of comics, leaving out, or at least placing less importance on, the "bilingual" characteristic of this artwork, which is highlighted in studies concerning the translation of these multimodal texts. As Cohn (2013, p. 13) points out, comics are written in two languages, visual and verbal; but it is also important to analyse the visual language separately. Cohn (2013) states that "[j]ust as people gesture while they talk, in actual usage, visual language most often occurs in conjunction with written language in the creation of meaning" (p. 13). Therefore, if the gestures and speech or the visual and verbal contents of comics contradict each other, the meaning of a situation becomes difficult to understand. Consequently, even though the visual and verbal modes of comics are essentially complementary, the reader of comics should master the basics of the visual language in order to comprehend the story fully.

The basic story that is told in comics is shown in a sequence of panels, but it is, in fact, the readers who fill in the gaps between the panels, completing the missing parts of the story, according to their expectations and previous knowledge of the world (McCloud, 1994, p. 68; Oittinen & Pitkäsalo, 2018, p.105; Zanettin, 2008, p. 13). There are elements of visual language that help and also guide the reader in this process. These elements have been referred to as the "grammar of comics" (Herkman, 1998, p. 68): the size and shape of the panels, the form of the speech bubbles, the use of different kinds of effect (sound effects, speed lines, etc.) and the layout of the panel are all details through which the visual language of comics is constructed.

However, other scholars have affirmed that there is no such thing as *the* language of comics, but that comics are written in two languages, visual and verbal, as emphasized by Cohn. Therefore, comics cannot have a grammar in the strict sense of the word (Cohn, 2013, p. 2). Instead, culture-bound conventions of visual expression are used in comics in a certain way and artists are expected to follow these. These conventions are called *visual language* in this article. For example, the size and shape of the panels are usually related to time, that is, the width of a panel traditionally interrelates the duration of events: tall, narrow panels illustrate that the events follow one another at a quick pace, whereas a wide, horizontal panel suggests that a run of events has slowed down or even stopped (McCloud, 1994, pp. 101–102). The example of the interrelationship between time and the size of panel is connected to the definition of the classic type of comics by Groensteen (2013, p. 40). He also discusses another type of comic operating "in a register that is more poetic than narrative" (Groensteen, 2013, p. 40). In comics of this more sophisticated type, the panel size does not necessarily refer to the duration of the illustrated acts. Consequently, the artist, too, can break the conventions of the classic types of comic, but a departure from this practice can create difficulties for the reader.

The situation becomes even more difficult if the reader is not familiar with the meanings of symbols and effects used in the panels, or the typographical means by which a loud noise or a whisper, for example, is marked. Usually, the techniques used to illustrate speed and sound in comics are—at least in North American and European comics—similar and quite easy to learn to recognize: for instance, speed lines are used to mark speed and bolded large letters are used to illustrate loud noises or voices.

In contrast, the non-verbal communication of the characters—here referring to gestures, postures and facial expressions—is at least partly culture-specific and can therefore often be difficult to interpret correctly if the cultural environment of the illustrated situation is not familiar to the reader. Strictly speaking, this communication is usually not counted among the details of the visual language of comics, but since the non-verbal communication of the characters is a meaning-making feature that is essential in order for the reader to understand the nuances of the story, in this study it is considered important to add the non-verbal communication of the characters to this section.

3. Focus group

Focus groups provide a method for studying, on the one hand, how the groups work together and, on the other, how together they interpret a particular phenomenon. The research material collected by using focus groups provides information about the experiences and opinions of the group members as a group. The focus-group method has been applied in sociological research such as market research in order to support product development and in the medical field to understand patients' experiences (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 40; Mäntyranta & Kaila, 2008, p. 1507).

It is difficult to define the ideal size of a focus group in advance, as it is impossible to predict the intensity of the group's interaction. The typical size of the group is from four to ten members. Yet, according to some researchers, the recommended number of participants should not exceed eight, because in the case of a larger group the research situation can be chaotic and cause a significant amount of work during the analysis stage (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001, pp. 26–28; Mäntyranta & Kaila, 2008, p. 1509; Tuominen, 2012, p. 118). The group members do not usually act as a group beyond the research situation, but knowing each other in advance is not an obstacle to the candidates' participation. The results received using the focus-group method are not supposed to be statistically representative, as the aim of the method is not to provide an exhaustive, objective information base for the theme studied, but rather a deeper understanding of it (Tuominen, 2012, p. 110).

The focus-group method can also be combined with other methods, such as surveys or perception research, in which the researcher only observes the research group. The focus-group method is a practical means of collecting research data, because focus groups may volunteer more precise information than surveys—for example, that of the interaction—and they may fill the gaps that remain in perception research. Therefore, focus-group discussions may be held in order to illustrate nuances or to clarify the contradictions that appear during the process of perception (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 40).

In the research situation, the researcher—or the moderator—only facilitates the discussion and the group members discuss the given topics in a relatively free way. Wilkinson (2006, p. 52) emphasizes the fact that, in focus-group discussions, the moderator seeks to encourage the participants to "interact with *each other*", and this is how focus-group discussions differ from group interviews in which the moderator asks questions of each participant. The focus-group discussions are also guided by the use of a list of questions prepared by the researcher, but the questions are not as structured as in group interviews, and the order of the questions can be prearranged only approximately (Tuominen, 2012, p. 113).

As a data-collecting method, the focus group is very productive, meaning that it produces a great deal of material for analysis. For the purposes of analysis, the material has to be filtered and sorted. After processing the material, the results can be presented in different ways. They can be cited or classified under themes; the details can be gathered together in a continuous text, or they can be presented as a combination of the two (Mäntyranta & Kaila, 2008, p. 1512).

The focus group offers a researcher great opportunities to gain key information about selected themes, but it also has its limitations. As the group aims at a consensus of the group members' different opinions, it is important that the group dynamics work well (Pietilä, 2017, p. 115). These dynamics may be disturbed if one or more members dominate the group or if one or more participants withdraw from the conversation. This kind of imbalance within the group can lead to one-sided interpretations of the conversation. Moreover, the role of the moderator is a sensitive one: if they play too domineering a role, the conversation can be directed to themes that may be interesting to the moderator but not to the group as a whole.

4. Course of the research

Since the study aimed to examine possible differences in the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of readers, the first focus group was conducted in Hungary and the second in Italy. The comic book is not an established art form in the Hungarian literary tradition, unlike in Italy, and it was therefore assumed that the Hungarian focus group might produce good comparative material in relation to the material collected from the Italian focus-group discussion. It was decided to limit the number of participants to five per focus group in order to increase each participant's participation. In the end, there were only four participants in the Italian focus group, as one of the candidates had to be rejected on the basis of his background (he had not lived in Italy as a child and he had a basic knowledge of the Finnish language). Some of the participants had known each other from before the study, but they did not act as groups beyond the research situation. The conversations were both voice- and video-recorded.

4.1 Questionnaires

Before starting the research, a two-part form was prepared. The first part comprised questions about the backgrounds of the participants, such as age, education and language skills. In addition, this part of the form included three questions:

- Do you read comics?
- Have you studied comics or are you familiar with comics research?
- What do you know about the visual language of comics?

According to their answers, all of the participants had a university education background. All of the Italian group members mentioned having read comics regularly until the age of 11 to 16. Two participants of the Hungarian group mentioned having read comics occasionally as children and one mentioned having "glanced" at comics every now and then. None of the participants had studied comics nor were they familiar with research about comics. The participants in the Hungarian group affirmed not knowing anything about the visual language of comics. In the Italian group, however, three participants mentioned the visual representation of onomatopoeic sounds as a feature of comics.

The second part of the form included questions concerning the influence of the research situation on the group members' participation:

- How did the presence of the other participants affect your opinion? (it strengthened my opinion, it changed my opinion, no influence)
- How did the voice and video recording affect the way you behaved in the research situation? (I talked more, I talked less, no influence)
- How did the presence of the researcher affect the way you behaved in the research situation? (I talked more, I talked less, no influence)

The participants filled in the first part in advance of the research situation and the second part after its conclusion.

4.2 Reading material

As the material for the focus-group discussions, mainly the Finnish version of the graphic novel *Sarasvatin hiekkaa* (2008) was used. In one case only (page 4), one panel of the original Finnish version was used side by side with its English translation. In the panel in question, a sound effect is added into the English translation and what was of interest was to ascertain what kind of conversation this translational—or editorial—decision would provoke.

The novel introduces a group of scientists who are investigating the changes in the different states of water and sand at the bottom of the oceans, in the glaciers of Greenland and in the various geological forms in the Bahamas, Canada and Finland. Russian oceanographers observe the changes occurring at the bottom of the Norwegian Sea; a group of Indian archaeologists study the ruins at the bottom of the Gulf of Cambay (today known as the Gulf of Khambat); Philippine glaciologist Susan Cheng observes the changes in the ice sheets in Greenland, and Finnish researcher Kari Alanen, located on the south coast of Finland, attempts to find solutions to the melting ice sheets. Towards the end of the novel, these seemingly unrelated stories interweave, and in the course of the story-telling the connection between them becomes obvious, drawing a frightening picture of the near future.

As the basis of their discussions, the focus groups were given eight pages from this graphic novel; these pages are described in the course of the analysis below. The pages were divided into two series on the basis of the research topic. The first of the series concerns the visual means used to illustrate sounds and movements, such as sound effects and speed lines, or the pace of the events depicted by the size and shape of the panels. The second group of the series was related to gestures and facial expressions communicating the senses of the characters, for example.

4.3 Focus-group discussions

For the focus-group discussions, some questions were prepared in advance in order to guide the discussions:

- What happens in the image?
- How fast do things happen?
- On what basis?
- What do the gestures and facial expressions tell you about what happens in the image?
- What do the gestures and facial expressions tell you about the relationships between the characters and about the tone of the conversation?

The questions varied according to the contents of the images. The groups were asked to discuss freely the events narrated on each page based on these questions. The focus groups could talk about each image as long as they required; only the previously prepared outline and the participants' own timetables guided the discussions. Even though the length of the discussions was not restricted, both research situations lasted 30 minutes.

The participants were asked to sign an agreement concerning the voice and video recordings of their discussion and the usage of the recordings for research purposes. After the research situation, the voice material was transcribed by the author and his research assistant. The author also compiled a summary of the transcriptions and the forms filled in by the participants.

The groups talked actively about all of the images. According to the voice material of the Hungarian group, two participants' activity is more prominent than others' and, in addition, one of them speaks in a very loud voice. The video material shows that one group member is actually participating in the discussion, but seems to remain in the background of the voice material because of her quiet voice. The same phenomenon is present in the Italian material: three participants seem to be more active and one of them appears to withdraw from the conversation, but this impression is created as a consequence of his quiet voice.

Both groups negotiated the meanings of the non-verbal messages conveyed by the images, and it was clearly perceptible that the group members actively tried to find a common opinion concerning these meanings. During the discussions, the participants frequently used the expression "in my opinion" ("szerintem" in Hungarian, "secondo me" in Italian) and an expression that requests acknowledgement or affirmation of their own opinion: "no?" ("nem?" or "ugye?" in Hungarian, "no?" or "o no?" in Italian).

5. Analysis of the focus-group discussions

The focus groups were given eight pages from the reading material, which they discussed quite freely. The conversations of both of the focus groups were transcribed, and the transcribed data were classified under themes. The material was divided into two series, the first depicting speed and noises, the second gestures and facial expressions. The reading material was used to seek answers to the following questions:

- Do the non-verbal messages come across in the image?
- Do the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the readers affect the reading experience?
- What happens if the readers are not familiar with the visual language of comics?

5.1 Speed and noises

The first series contained five pages from the graphic novel chosen. On the basis of these images, an answer was sought to the question of how the reader senses the speed and noises illustrated through the visual language of comics.

In the first page shown to the participants, glacier researcher Susan Cheng is in Greenland with French journalist Peter Chamberlain examining a big hole that has appeared in the middle of an ice sheet. The pace of events accelerates when the ice sheet begins to collapse. In particular, the size and shape of the panels illustrate the duration of the events: tall, narrow panels show that things are happening quickly until the events slow down and, in the end, stop at the silent and static moment after the collapse, which is demonstrated in a wide horizontal panel. On the page, the sound effect travels across panels, which is one of the narrative means in comics that connects the panels together

and guides the reader to interpret almost the whole page as a single uninterrupted movement. The layout and the form of the sound effect indicate not only the direction but also the volume of the noise (Herkman, 1998, pp. 45–46).

The main points of the Hungarian and Italian focus-group discussions about page 1 are listed in Table 1. Each table consists of a short summary of the discussions of the two focus groups. The columns indicate the situation or place depicted in the examined page and the categories chosen according to the research questions. The words in brackets are codes that help the reader to see the similarities and the differences in the interpretation of the two groups. In addition, there is a column for other comments, for instance additional information gathered from the discussion of the questions the researcher did not pose.

Table 1: Focus-group discussions about page 1

	The Hungarian group	The Italian group
Place/situation	Avalanche	Landslide or explosion
Sound	Sound effect (the intensity of the noise)	Sound effect (the intensity of the noise, continuity of events)
Speed	Sound effect (motion) Speed lines (speed) Zoom (motion) Posture (motion)	Sound effect (motion) Zoom (speed) Number of panels (speed)
Other comments	"The voice starts from the bottom and strengthens when going upward."	Speed lines (direction) "The picture is dominated by the voice."

The Hungarian group said that the speed lines indicate that things are happening quickly and the "letters" (meaning "sound effect"), the zooming to the characters and the postures of the characters indicate movement. According to the group members, the characters' postures indicate that there is movement in the panels. Neither the size and shape of the panels nor the continuity of the events indicated by the sound effect were mentioned as a means of illustrating speed.

The Italian group said that the sound effect indicates motion and speed, but also the intensity of the noise, because the large letters indicate a strong noise; in addition, the letters travelling across the panels show that the noise and the events are continuous. The speed lines express direction: they show that the character in the image is sliding downwards. Both the zooming and the number of panels depict speed. However, the group members did not mention such details as the size and shape of the panels.

The second and the third pages show glacier researcher Susan Cheng, who has descended into a glacier cave through a hole in the middle of the ice sheet to investigate where the water has disappeared to. As she is hanging on a rope against the wall of the ice cave, an enormous boulder of ice breaks off, nearly crushing her. The boulder narrowly misses her and falls into the water far below her. The discussions of the Hungarian and the Italian groups are shown in Table 2 (page 2) and Table 3 (page 3).

Table 2: Focus-group discussions about page 2

	The Hungarian group	The Italian group
Place/situation	A cave	A cave
Sound	The KRIIK sound effect: a noise from the rope. The noise is not continuous.	The KRIIK sound effect: a noise from the rope.
Speed		The change of light and darkness (speed).
Other comments	Descending is slow, but the events speed up in the last panel (sound effect).	Descending is first slow and silent (darkness, no sound effects). "There is total silence inside and a rumble can be heard from outside."

Both groups noticed that on page 2 the events speed up towards the end of the image, but the Italian group focused on the details of the visual language, such as the play of light and shadow, which illustrates speed, according to the group members. The Italian group also mentioned that the sound effect in the last panel indicates that the rumbling noise comes from outside, while there is total silence and darkness inside the cave.

Discussions about page 3 (see Table 3) did not provide too much information for the comparative analysis, because page 3 provoked lively discussion only among the Hungarian group.

Table 3: Focus-group discussions about page 3

	The Hungarian group	The Italian group
Place/situation	A cave	A cave
Sound	KRAK sound effect (dripping water) RRRR sound effect (collapsing ice, chafing rope)	KRAK sound effect (breaking ice or rock) RRRR sound effect (landslide, explosion)
Speed	Dynamic motion (speed) Facial expressions (speed)	

Both groups described the events illustrated on page 3, but only the Hungarian group delineated, for example, the details that express speed: the dynamic motion in panels and the facial expressions. They also mentioned that the events possibly follow one another at a fast pace, because the panels do not contain everything that happens and the reader must decide what happens between the panels.

The Hungarian group in particular had an animated discussion about the sound effects. It interpreted the KRAK! sound effect as referring to the dripping water, whereas the Italian group said KRAK! illustrates the breaking rock or ice, but also that the rope could cause the noise. The Hungarian group interpreted the RRRR sound effect as coming from the collapsing ice, but also from the noise of the chafing rope. The Italian group interpreted the RRRR sound effect as the rumbling and aggressive noise of a landslide or an explosion.

Page 4 included two panels: a panel separated from page 3 and its English translation with a sound effect. A new sound effect (FOOOSHH) has been added to the panel, which depicts a huge ice boulder falling down into the water far below. Both groups agreed that adding an effect to the image is a good choice, because the effect shows that the boulder is no longer falling. The Hungarian group mentioned that without the effect the reader does not necessarily notice that there is a falling object in the image: it could

also be a stain, a hole or a crater. The choice of sound for the effect provoked some thought because of its meaning in the pronounced form in Hungarian slang (meaning "diarrhoea"). The Italian group remarked that the sound effect slows down and softens the fall.

The last page in this series, page 5, illustrates chaos occurring in a dockyard. A big tsunami is approaching and sirens are wailing. The page evoked many thoughts in both groups (see Table 4).

Table 4: Focus-group discussions about page 5

	The Hungarian group	The Italian group
Place/situation	Harbour (perhaps a construction site)	Dockyard (perhaps a factory or a construction site)
Sound	EEEE sound effect (a falling person or an event before the falling; a helicopter) RRRR sound effect (rumbling, continuous, strengthening noise)	EEEE sound effect (siren) RRRR sound effect (tsunami, continuous noise) Colours indicating distance from the noises
Speed	Postures (running people)	Postures (running people)
Other comments	Chaos, tension Darkness	Chaos, shock, anxiety, loneliness, insecurity "The voice is dominating the image."

Both the Hungarian and the Italian groups agreed that page 5 shows a highly tense, chaotic situation. Both groups pondered over the location and even though they also mentioned that there were other possible scenarios for a scene, such as a construction site or a factory, the main proposal was a harbour (the Hungarian group) or a dockyard (the Italian group). Both groups described the events in the same way: something threatening is happening, because everybody is running and phoning. Only the Italian group mentioned the wailing sirens as a sign of danger.

The Italian group examined the drawings carefully. For example, they focused on describing the speed of the events panel by panel. They also detailed the panel illustrating the ships and tried to define the kinds of ship in the image: naval vessels, trading vessels or tankers. In addition, they noticed that there must be a tsunami approaching, because the ships have been drawn in a strange way in the picture.

The sound effects also provoked discussion. The Italian group observed that the EEEE sound effect comes from the siren, whereas the Hungarian group could not decide what the source of the noise was. They suggested that the first sources could be a helicopter, a person falling or an event before the fall, but in the end they did not agree on a falling person as the source of the noise or voice, because they felt that the sound effect would have come out of the falling person's mouth if it were intended to depict their voice.

The Hungarian group did not discuss the RRRR sound effect extensively: they mentioned only that it is a kind of continuous, strengthening rumble. As for the Italian group, they discussed this effect actively. The source of the sound effect confused them: they thought it should illustrate the noise of a wave (a tsunami), but they remarked that RRRR is not how waves sound. They also discussed the intensity of the noises: the siren seems to be louder than the other noise which remains in the background, because of the different degree of visibility of the sound effects. When the source of the RRRR sound effect approaches, the letters of the sound effect become clearly visible, which is illustrated by a change in the colours. They mentioned that even though the meanings of the sound effects are not clear, the drawing is successful, especially that in panel 1, where the noise dominates the image.

5.2 Gestures and facial expressions

The second series comprised three pages. On the basis of these images, answers were sought to the question whether the meanings of the gestures and facial expressions of the characters come through without a supporting verbal mode. The participants were asked to describe the tone of the conversation and the relationships between the characters on the basis of the characters' gestures and facial expressions.

The first page in this series—page 6—shows two persons (the Russian researcher Sergei Savelnikov and the Indian researcher Amrita Desai) who meet each other at the international airport of Mumbai. The page did not provoke much discussion, and the interpretations of the focus groups (peacefulness of Amrita, embarrassment of Sergei) did not display notable differences in the meanings attributed to the gestures and the facial expressions illustrated in the image. Only one gesture provoked thoughts among the Italian group members: Sergei, the man, has put his hand on his chest, which can connote either relief or surprise.

The second page in the series—page 7—illustrates a meeting where Amrita, Sergei and their colleague discuss the extraordinary archaeological findings at the bottom of the Gulf of Cambay (Khambhat). Both groups focused on different things on this page (see Table 5).

Table 5: Focus-group discussions about page 7

	The Hungarian group	The Italian group
Place/situation	Teaching (the man shows the map) Debate	(Discussion of some personal issues)
Gestures	Sign of victory Concern (the man is holding his head) Suspicion (the man is scratching his head)	Sign of victory Insecurity (the man is holding his head) Pensiveness (hands) Blaming (the woman is pointing her finger at the man; she is raising her hands in front of herself). The man is excusing himself (hands).
Facial expressions		Hate (the eyes of the woman) "She is extremely angry. She looks at the man as if to say: 'you have killed my son.'"
Other comments	Convincing the others (the woman's body language) Getting frightened about something (the postures) Candour (the man leans against the others) Unconcern (the man leans backwards on the chair)	

The Italian group did not define the characteristics of the situation at all; they described it only through emotions: according to their explanations, the situation could be a heated discussion about some personal issues. The Hungarian group said the image could illustrate a debate or a teaching situation. The gestures were discussed in a lively manner by both groups; some of them were interpreted in a somewhat similar way (the raised hands marking suspicion, according to the Hungarian group, and pensiveness, according to the Italian group), while some were interpreted in totally different ways. For example, the gesture of Amrita, the woman, pointing her finger at the man (Sergei) was interpreted

by the Hungarian group as a gesture of convincing the others, whereas the Italian group said that it shows that the woman is blaming the man. The Italian group focused on the gestures even though they also mentioned facial expressions (Amrita's blaming and hateful eyes indicating very strong emotions). But the Hungarian group also mentioned the posture of the characters: leaning against the others means that the person is frank or open with the others, while leaning backwards expresses that he is unconcerned about the situation in question.

On the last page of the series, four persons (Sergei, Kari, Vasili and Amrita) are in northern Greenland. They are discussing how the forthcoming catastrophe could be avoided. The page did not provoke too much discussion (see Table 6).

Table 6: Focus-group discussions about page 8

	The Hungarian group	The Italian group
Place/situation	A working-place situation	Negotiation; common problem, no opposite sides
Gestures	Pensiveness (a man holding his chin) Fright, falsehood or horror (the woman holding her hands in front of her mouth)	Emotionally upset
Facial expressions	Evil itself	Emotionally upset Hate
Other comments	The man is excusing himself (posture) "The woman and the man in orange are clearly comfortable with each other."	

Both groups discussed the gestures and facial expressions, but there were no significant differences compared to the discussion on the previous image. The Hungarian group described the situation in a more emotional way, using words such as "fearful", "liar" and "terrified" and expressions such as "evil itself", stating that the situation is a working-place one. According to the Italian group, the image depicts a negotiation situation; it added that the topic of the negotiation is a common problem which causes emotional upset, expressed through gestures and facial expressions. One interesting point that was raised from the discussions was an observation by a participant in the Hungarian group. On the basis of the postures, she noticed that there is an intimate relationship between the woman and a man illustrated in the picture.

5.3 Summary of the analysis

Most of the pages containing sound and other effects and also the gestures and facial expressions provoked much discussion in both focus groups. Compared to the Hungarian group, the Italian group examined the images more carefully, for example, by describing the speed of the events panel by panel when they discussed page 5. The Italian group used expressions that showed their competence at understanding the visual language of comics, such as the zooming effect and the effects indicating the motion and direction of movement as well as the number of panels expressing speed. In contrast, the Hungarian group didn't always interpret the meaning of the sound effects correctly: for example, when discussing page 1, the group said that the noise (the sound effect describing the collapse of the ice sheet) starts from the bottom of the page and gets more intense towards the top of the page, contrary to expectations regarding the reading direction. The continuity of the noises was usually mentioned as something to be expected: the noise is continuous if the sound effect travels from panel to panel.

The sound effects are usually based on onomatopoeia, which—on the basis of the focus-group discussions—is a culture-bound phenomenon. For example, the sound effect illustrating cracking ice (KRAK) was, according to the Hungarian group, the noise coming from water dripping, and the alarming EEEE noise was construed as that of a helicopter or the voice of a person falling. The Italian group interpreted these sound effects as one would expect: KRAK as a noise of breaking ice or rock and EEEE as a noise coming from the siren. However, both groups agreed that the KRIIK sound effect depicts a noise coming from the rope. The RRRR sound effect on page 5 was a slightly more complicated issue, according to the Italian group: the sound should come from the approaching big wave, but the sound effect chosen does not illustrate the noise of the wave.

Discussions about page 4 demonstrated how sound effects are used to elaborate the meaning of an image. Adding the FOOOSSH sound effect to the panel that illustrates a falling ice boulder made the situation more understandable, according to both groups, but the Hungarian group did not find the choice of the sound successful because of its specific meaning in the Hungarian language.

The gestures provoked much discussion, in contrast to the discussion about the facial expressions. Generally, the gestures were interpreted in an almost similar way by both groups: the raised hands indicate suspicion, according to the Hungarian group, or pensiveness, according to the Italian group, whereas the interpretations of some gestures differed to a considerable extent. For example, the gesture of pointing a finger at another person on page 7 was interpreted as expressing persuasion by the Hungarian group and as blaming by the Italian group. Another interesting difference between the groups was that the Hungarian group discussed the relationships between the characters more (e.g., the intimate relationship between two characters came out), whereas the Italian group focused on the expression of emotions (e.g., the vindictiveness expressed by the woman on page 7).

In addition, postures were also discussed. For example, when discussing page 7, the Hungarian group mentioned that leaning against others is a sign of the person's candour towards the others and leaning backwards expresses that he is not taking part in the conversation in question.

6. Conclusion

The focus-group method was suitable for answering the main research questions. The main results relate to the questions how the non-verbal messages are understood without the support of the verbal mode and, subsequently, what the issues are to which the translator of a multimodal text has to pay attention. The results, on the one hand, strengthened this author's view of understanding the visual language of comics as being a learned ability and, on the other, they detracted from it in some respects. This would indicate that there may be some universal characteristics regarding one's competence to understand comics. The discussions fortified the idea that there might be some kind of precoding system concerning the elements of the visual language of comics, as Jokinen (2011, p. 102) suggests, because the Italian group, with their tradition of reading comics, made exact observations about the full set of panels and also used expressions that indicated their ability to understand the visual language of comics.

The discussions by the Hungarian and the Italian groups showed that the issue of cultural background, including the tradition of reading comics, is significant in the way, for example, that the groups interpreted the meanings of the sound effects. This arises from the fact that the readers interpret these and other non-verbal messages through the conventions of their own language and culture, because the symbols and non-verbal communication, such as body language, can be expressed differently in different

linguistic and cultural settings. In addition, the Italian group participants read the first pages from the viewpoint of their southern European surroundings: the situation in the first pages was first interpreted as illustrating a landslide.

The non-verbal messages, such as the sound effects and the gestures and facial expressions, are not only culture-bound but are also a contextual phenomenon. This may affect the way the readers experience the messages even though they do not have any knowledge of the visual language of comics in advance, as was the case with the Hungarian group. Removing the verbal mode of the text that combines the verbal and the visual modes influenced the interpretation of the situations, but in the case of the sound effects, the effect was less pronounced than had been anticipated. In fact, the interpretation of the gestures suffered from the removal of the verbal, in other words the situational, context.

The results of the study indicate that the focus-group method can elicit much detailed information about the experiences of individuals and reader groups. Even if the method is not entirely suitable for collecting universally applicable information about the topic, it has proved to be a competent method for this research. The method even uncovered new elements in the study set, adding new aspects to the repertoire of visual means of communication in comics. For instance, the Italian group mentioned two unexpected features: the use of colours indicating distance from the noises and the change of light and darkness indicating speed.

A study implemented in two different cultural contexts produces valuable insights for improving an understanding of cultural differences in the interpretation of visual content, which may help translators with translating the verbal content. For instance, the study gave information about the differences in the interpretation of non-verbal communication, which—in some cases—could lead the translator to add some extra information to the verbal content in order to avoid any contradictions between the verbal and the visual contents. In addition, the translator should pay attention to the nature of the sound effects as a culture-bound phenomenon and, if needed—and possible—encourage the editors to replace them with sound effects that correspond more closely to the sounds understood in the target culture and language.

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